DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 014 PS 017 931

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TITLE The Impact on Child Care Providers of the Report of the Committee on Child Development Research and Public Policy, Panel on Child Care Policy of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 27-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Advocacy; *Child Caregivers; *Cooperation; Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Financial Support; *Planning; *Public Policy; *Standards
IDENTIFIERS *State Regulation

ABSTRACT

Briefly discussed are the possible effects on child caregivers of the report of the Committee on Child Development Research and Public Policy, Panel on Child Care Policy of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Coch Council. Specific attention is given to: (1) national standards and state regulation; (2) funding sources; and (3) planning and coordination. Consequences of establishing national standards and making state regulations uniform are probed. Complex issues of funding, such as direct and indirect subsidies, are briefly addressed. The need for local, state, and federal planning and coordination in this rapidly growing field is pointed out. Concluding remarks suggest that, with the help of children's advocates using the report, the lives of all those involved in child care can be improved. (RH)

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The Impact on Child Care Providers of the Report of the Committee on Child Development Research and Public Policy , Panel on Child Care Policy of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council

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Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Kansas City , Missouri
April, 1989

PS 017631

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Child care in the United States is like a patchwork quilt that has never been sewn together, with exquisite bright pieces and dull, very ordinary pieces, as well as ragged pieces that would be difficult to fit into an orderly pattern. Yet many of us in the field have been struggling for years with the need for a comprehensive child care quilt that will cover the needs of children and their parents. Those of us with the hands-on child care experience feel that we know what is required to make the service better, more uniformly available and more comprehensive. Just give us the money to pay more-than-poverty level wages and benefits to caregivers, let universities and colleges provide relevant training for staff, give us decent housing and affordable insurance, make regulations understandable and enforceable and provide parents the support they need to make choices appropriate for their individual needs. We have known all of this for years without the benefit of research, without the benefit of investigative committees and without the benefit of very much understanding or support from the old boys' network that makes this country run.

Now, at last, we have a report documenting the wisdom of years of hard work with children and their families. The report of the Committee on Child Development Research and Public Policy, Panel on Child Care Policy of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council has pulled together the work of practitioners, researchers, policy makers and dreamers to propose recommendations for a comprehensive and diverse national policy which addresses the needs of children and families.

I have been asked to discuss the possible effects of this report on practitioners. As I was one of the 20 members of the Panel, I'm sure you can appreciate my bias. It was hard work and I'll venture to say we all learned from the process. I must say it was not all easy. It was difficult to listen to supply-side economists when they talk about children. It was difficult to hear questions raised for which I was sure I knew the answer; offer those answers and then be questioned about what research had been conducted to verify my conclusions. I learned that this report was going to be carefully crafted, meticulously documented and every side of a problem was to be explored. I have come through the experience with new respect for those I have often questioned, as well as a feeling of how important it is to have practioners,those who are doing child care every day, on panels such as this. For the experience and the new-found understanding that I gained, I would like to especially credit the work of Cheri Hayes and John Palmer who gently prodded and guided 20 strongly motivated individuals with a wide variety of opinions and view-points

into a cohesive group that came to concensus on the policy recommendations of the Panel.

What will be the effect of this report on practioners of child care? I have already described the effect that the development of the report has had on me, but I'm sure that you will all understand that I can only make an educated guess of what I think will be the reaction to the report by such a diverse group of providers as we have in this country. At this moment I have no research to back my position. It is also difficult to discuss the report, since Panel members have been asked not to discuss its contents until it has been released by the Academy of Sciences. Therefore my discussion will have to be rather general and not specific in terms of recommendations. Given those restrictions, the areas that most directly effect the hour-to-hour, day-to-day, week-to-week operation of child care have to do with 1) standards and regulation; 2) funding sources; 3) planning and coordination.

STANDARDS AND REGULATION

One of the most impressive parts of this report for me has been the recognition that child care is complex and that the answers to the many problems it poses are also complex. The question of who child care serves is addressed, as well as a review of the literature documenting that no one intervention will change the face of this vital service. Clearly there are clusters of characteristics that impact on the quality of programs and these may be indicators which might be regulated. Group size, caregiver/child ratios, caregivers characteristics and training are all in this category, but perhaps family characteristics, health of children, site of program and or stability of staff are as important.

If national standards are adopted and state regulations made more uniform, will this make the cost of care prohibitive for those most in need?. The other Senator from California, whose name is not Cranston, seems to think so. Currently, child care is expensive no matter how it is provided because it is a labor intensive program. It is simply a matter of who pays for it and at what developmental point in the human cycle the price is extracted. Most often the caregivers of the country have subsidized good, quality programs through low wages and no benefits or parents have paid a far greater share of their income than they can afford, if one were to weigh their need for housing, food and health care. For poor quality care it is most often the children who have paid through the development of

handicapping conditions resulting in the need for later more expensive, remedial programs. Society's price for the poor care of children, is undeveloped youngsters who will never become productive adults.

Can national standards and good, strong, enforceable State regulations insure that poor care will no longer exist? I rather doubt it. But what a boon it would be to have in place an ideal (standards) as well as a floor below which a program may not operate (regulations). Imagine a set of understandable, standardized (at least in terms of language), doable standards and regulations against which we can measure our programs. For example, as a provider I would certainly welcome a uniform definition of at what ages infancy ends, of some recognition that toddlers exist and have different needs than preschool age children. Imagine using standards to help parents with decision making for child care arrangements from Mississippi to Montana; from Vermont to Arizona.

How standards and regulations may be enforced is a crucial question. Tune in later for the report itself.

FUNDING SOURCES

How child care is to be funded in the future is of vital interest to child care providers. In the not too distant past, child care was considered primarily a welfare service. It was regarded as a temporary program available to poor women who were unable to cope or were considered unable to care for their children. Payments were made through income disregard, directly from local welfare agencies and or through charitable groups. The picture has changed dramatically as more women have entered the workforce and as child care has become a working, middle and upper class issue.

The report addresses the complex issues of funding, taking into account the difficulties of federal, state and local financing. This is of particular concern to providers, because the auspices from which their financial support comes affects their wages and benefits, the kind of support services they may receive, the families they will serve and the standards and regulations they may have imposed upon them. Directly subsidized programs generally have more stringent requirements and employees generally receive higher pay, with benefits.

Another important aspect of direct subsidy is the population being served. At a recent meeting I met a woman who directs a subsidized program in San Francisco. The children enrolled all had some difficulties stemming from parental drug addiction. This does not mean that all children in subsidized programs are difficult. Rather it points out that the less we do for our nation's most needy children in terms of the basics such as food, housing and health care, the more nurturance directly subsidized child care must provide, a basic right most industrialized countries simply take for granted.

Indirect subsidies such as tax benefits to parents incentives to employers, parental leave and vendor voucher programs are of interest to providers. The effects of this kind of support tend to make for closer contact with parents and caregivers. It also requires more education for parents in the decision making process, since we do little to provide the needed information to make a good match in child care arrangements.

PLANNING AND COORDINATION

The need for local, state and federal planning and coordination for child care has never been greater than now. The field is growing at a very rapid pace. The fact that we are a nation of great diversity in our life styles, our values, and our expectations for our children, is only compounded when we add to the equation the variety of child care arrangements from in-home to family day care to center care; as well as the auspices of programs from private to public, from church-related to charitable groups, to public and private schools and universities and corporations. In addition, program philosophy and hours of care further complicate the problems.

It is truly a chaotic situation. There is little coordination, let alone planning at any level of government. For example, there is no national comprehensive, comparable data available on the supply and demand of child care. In California, because of the growth of Resource and Referral programs, located in every county, we are beginning to acquire this data. Nationally this is not available.

Planning and coordination are not only necessary for policy makers to make informed decisions, but on a local level may be translated into vital resources for parents looking for child care, as well as for providers in finding locations where their services are needed and connecting with a

variety of support services. Again, in California, several cities and counties, recognizing the need for data and coordination, have added Child Care Coordinators to their staff. It is interesting to note that these newly appointed coordinators are spending a good deal of their efforts in attempting to expedite zoning and interdepartmental issues of fire, health and safety. As child care grows, so does the territoriality of our bureaucracies.

In closing, it must be clear that we have high hopes that this report can make a difference. By itself, nothing can be expected of words and pages bound together. But with the help of children's advocates utilizing the report we can improve the lives of all of those who are involved in child care : the children, the parents, the caregivers and the community. Putting a patchwork quilt together is not easy. It takes a vision of what it should look like, a tremendous amount of effort and many small stitches. For my part, the stitches were done with an increasing belief that we can provide a needed, nurturing cover for our nation's children.